

i shall blossom in this barren earth

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i shall blossom in this barren earth

by [Mollshka \(CaptainAmelia22\)](#)

Summary

Wei Ying comes out of prison a very different person than when he'd gone in. He tries to find peace in his sister's barren garden. And in the process becomes friends with his neighbors. And remembers what it's like to be a little bit human.

Notes

Hello back again with the insomnia stress writing! Should be working on homework but instead I'm over here feeling emotional as I listen to k-pop and think about Wei Ying and how great at gardening he would be.

Some brief notes: I tagged this for rape since there is the briefest mention of a background character's assault. If you wish to skip that part it is mentioned at "One kid, Wen Ning, had cried his first week in his cell" and ends at "Wen Ning had been shifted to a less cutthroat part of the prison."

I don't have much knowledge of how prison works (thankfully) and I don't really know much about house arrest and the parole process. So that's all very "hand wavy." I also make some mentions of Wen Chao being murdered which is assumed why WWX is in prison. It's not important I feel like so I didn't focus too much on it.

Ummmmmm

Really this is just me stress/insomnia writing so like, I have no idea how good it is haha. Any mistakes are my own. If you notice anything I missed in the tags please let me know!

Thanks all! Stay healthy and safe!

“There. That too tight Steven?”

The green light set deep into the ankle bracelet’s battery pack flashes cheerfully and Wei Ying grins.

“I’ve worn tighter things, Chuck.”

His parole officer, a portly white guy nearing 50, snorts and shakes his head. He sits back on his heels, folds his arms over his knees and gazes thoughtfully at Wei Ying through the thick lenses of his glasses.

“You going to be okay, kid?” he asks, voice pitched low so Wei Ying’s hovering sister and brother-in-law can’t hear them. “It’s been a long time since you’ve been out. It’s going to take some adjusting. You got some friends to talk to, beside your sis and brother?”

Wei Ying shifts on Jiang Yanli’s couch and glances at his sister, her face a twisted mask of concern and anxiety, then to Jin Zixuan, frowning just enough to pucker his perfectly manicured brows.

And he feels his smile go a little brittle.

“I’ll be fine, Chuck,” he says, turning back to the man kneeling before him, the keys of his freedom tucked away once more in his jeans pocket. “I’ve got thirteen years of TV to catch up on.”

Chuck arches a brow. He’d been Wei Ying’s personal parole officer and mentor for the past five years in the prison system. He had never once seen the man watch TV.

“Mhm,” he hums, shaking his head slightly before heaving himself to his feet with a grunt. “You know how to reach me, Steven. You have any issues, feel like you’re in over your head, you call me, okay?”

Wei Ying will never call Chuck Gransley.

Not if he can fucking help it.

“See ya later, Chuck,” he says, patting the big guy on the shoulder as he escorts him to his sister’s front door. He closes the door in the parole officer’s face before the older guy can say anything else.

And Wei Ying sighs, resting his forehead on the cool wood of the door.

“Fuck,” he breathes, tears pricking his eyes when Jiang Yanli calls his name, voice gentle and lilting, reminding him of better days.

Of happier times.

“Come eat, Wei Ying,” she calls. “I have noodles.”

And he shudders, trying to remember what it is to be human.

**

His sister's garden is barren.

Wei Ying gazes at it and tries to not make comparisons between himself and the withered tomato vines. He absently scratches his toes along the ankle monitor, biting his lip as he considers just where to begin.

When Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had moved into this house five years before, she'd been expecting Jin Ling and had had a craving for cucumbers and chili oil at all hours of the night. According to the Idiot Peacock, their neighbor had helped him build the first raised bed and then helped him plant a few cucumber plants.

When Jin Ling was born his sister had run out of time and energy to keep up with the garden but their neighbor had regularly weeded the small raised bed, fertilized it and then planted a couple cucumbers, some tomatoes and even a couple chili plants.

Jin Zixuan had smiled the night before, wrapping his hands around the bottle of beer he'd been nursing for the past hour or so.

Wei Ying just fiddled with his cup of cold tea and tried to not feel like bugs were crawling under his skin.

"Lan Zhan is a good guy," Jin Zixuan had said, glancing at Jiang Yanli who was curled up beside Wei Ying, her head in his lap. She'd dozed off after her second glass of wine, content to listen to the two men chat about nothing. "He adopted a little boy last year, though, so he's kind of run out of time to keep up with the garden. You know how it is. Kids."

He laughs and Wei Ying's lips twitch in an approximation of a smile.

"Yeah," he says, running his fingers through his sister's chin length hair. "Mind if I take a look at it? I did some gardening in the prison. Found it...relaxing."

Jin Zixuan shrugs, waves his hand. "Sure, Wei Ying, go for it," he says. "We have tools in the garage, anything we don't have, Lan Zhan probably does. Just let me know what you need and I'll find it for you, okay?" He hesitates for a moment, a faint blush running along his cheeks and the aquiline bridge of his nose. Wei Ying braces.

"You okay, Wei Ying?" Jin Zixuan asks, voice pitched low and eyes not quite meeting Wei Ying's. "Really?"

Wei Ying's hand trembles against his sister's skull, the fingers convulsing ever so slightly at the back of her head, an instinctual grip that makes his blood run cold for a moment.

And his smile goes a little crooked.

"Yeah, Xuanxuan," he says, rising carefully from the couch and setting his sister's head down upon the cushions. "Yeah, I'm great. I'm going to go to bed. Used to early nights, you know

how it is. Night Peacock.”

Jin Zixuan is quiet, eyes grave as he watches Wei Ying drop his teacup off in the kitchen, dumping the cold tea and rinsing it. Wei Ying can feel his eyes on the back of his head as he makes his way to the stairs and the guest bedroom with its soft purple and yellow bedding and curtains, the paintings of lotuses and peonies. The pictures of Jin Ling, chubby and toothless, then chubby and full of teeth, then chubby and riding his first bike.

Wei Ying sighs, leaning back against the door when he closes it and he tries to remember what it’s like to breathe.

What it’s like to breathe without a knife to his ribs.

**

The garden is a *mess*.

“Who the fuck planted romas with corn, Jesus Christ,” Wei Ying mutters, blinking sweat from his eyes. He has a pair of his sister’s ridiculously big sunglasses on and an old straw hat he’d found in the garage. It’d had a few spiders hanging out in it but he’d shaken them out near the sad little compost heap no one had turned in the past year.

The sun is warm on his bare shoulders, warming the trailing lines of ink and ridged scars that dot his slender body. Sweat drips into the waistband of his running shorts. But he pays it no mind. It’s warm. The dirt beneath his knees is a little tired. But it smells rich once he starts turning it and yanking dead volunteered tomato vines out.

His sister’s neighborhood is quiet this early in the morning, on a Wednesday.

Their neighbors keep to themselves, according to Zixuan. Only the infamous Lan Zhan seems to have made an impression on his sister and her dumb husband. Probably because he’s also Chinese.

Wei Ying huffs, muscles straining as he works at a particularly stubborn turnip root and grumbles under his breath.

“Who the fuck plants turnips in a raised bed? Fuck, that stupid Peacock, I-”

“That’s a bad word.”

Wei Ying, hardened criminal, recently paroled after thirteen years in the clink, his body covered in tattoos and scars he had not had when he’d first been thrown into a jail cell at 18, screams and tips out of the raised bed.

“What the f-heck!” he sputters, looking up at the child who had suddenly appeared in his sister’s cemetery of a garden. “Who the f-gosh darn are you?”

The little boy is about five, he estimates. Maybe six, judging by the amount of not-baby-teeth he has. Also Chinese, dark eyes wide and serious in his round little cheeks. He’s sucking on a popsicle, something that looks organic but still smells pretty damn good.

He's wearing a Lightning McQueen shirt and Scooby-Doo swim trunks and his sandals light up when he shifts restlessly over Wei Ying.

His bowl cut is perfectly cut, obviously fresh.

Wei Ying wills his frantically beating heart to calm the fuck down.

"You said a bad word," the little boy says solemnly. "And you are not bofu."

He frowns, a hilariously imperious expression on such a small human's face and Wei Ying can't help but smile.

"I'm Wei Ying," he says, holding his hand up and out for a handshake. He is still sprawled on the soft grass of the backyard, the sun warming the scars on his chest and belly now.

The little boy stares at him, then at his hand and thoughtfully licks his steadily melting popsicle.

"I'm Lan Yuan," he says finally, settling a very sticky hand in Wei Ying's and letting the adult shake his arm up and down a few times. "Why are you in bofu and ayi's garden?"

Wei Ying, grimacing at the sticky residue now coating his hand, rolls to his knees and stands.

"I'm staying with them for a while and wanted to help out in the garden since I like plants," he says over his shoulder, heading to the hose dripping next to the compost pile. "C'mere Yuan'er," he says, beckoning the kid over as he grabs the hose nozzle. "You're sticky. Let's get you cleaned up before you go back to your baba, okay?"

A-Yuan finishes his popsicle with one big bite, dark eyes considering Wei Ying and then, as Wei Ying playfully turns the hose on and sprays it in short bursts in A-Yuan's direction, he giggles and rushes over, holding his hands out eagerly for the hose spray.

Wei Ying chuckles and takes the popsicle stick, flicking it into the pile of sticks and pulled weeds he'd made close to the burn pit, then carefully turns the hose on, letting it spray lightly over the little boy's hands.

"Do you like Scooby-Doo, Yuan'er?" he asks, kneeling so he can more easily rub the kid's hands free of popsicle ick. "Shaggy was always my favorite. My brother had a crush on Daphne, don't tell him I told you that, okay?"

A-Yuan giggles and looks up at him with wide eyes.

"You know about *Scooby-Doo*?" he breathes, absolutely surprised and it is the actual cutest thing Wei Ying has ever seen.

"He-Heck yeah kiddo," he says, setting the hose down and grabbing his old black, cutoff t-shirt from the edge of the raised bed. He hums the theme of the old cartoon as he dries the kid's hands and A-Yuan's giggles turn into full belly chortles as he sings a little off key along with Wei Ying's humming.

“Scooby is my favorite,” he says solemnly. “I want a dog like him but a-die says no.”

He pouts, bottom lip poking out so adorably and Wei Ying settles back on his heels, feeling something a bit like happiness fluttering its wings along the aching shell of his chest.

“Keep working at him, baobei,” he says, grinning and leaning forward to bop the little boy on his cute little nose. “No one will be able to resist those dimples for long, okay?”

Then with a faint groan and the gunshot pop of his knees, he rises and pats A-Yuan on the head.

“Okay kiddo, time for you to go back to your baba and I need to get back to my work, okay? Thanks for stopping by. It was really nice meeting you.”

A-Yuan, still pouting ever so slightly, bites his lip and glances at the garden.

“Can I help you plant stuff?” he asks, turning back to Wei Ying with eyes as wide as silver dollars. “Please? I like planting things. I have my own shovel and everything!”

Wei Ying stares into those big, desperate eyes and has a moment of *What the fuck are you thinking Wei Ying. You are a **criminal**. You have a **record**. That people can find in public record without really trying. No respectable parent wants you around their kid. No one would want you to even **look** at their kids.*

And he sighs.

“Sure, Yuan’er. If you want to help me plant some marigolds to keep the bugs away, you can come over tomorrow, okay?” he hears himself saying, ruffling his fingers through the little boy’s hair as he bounces happily at his side.

**

“How is your brother-in-law settling in?”

Lan Zhan’s voice is pitched low on the other end of the line and Jin Zixuan realizes with a jolt that it’s well after 9 p.m. and both of their kids are probably in bed. And he hasn’t even taken his suit off.

He sighs and rubs his forehead, leaning his head back against the headrest of the driver’s seat.

“Wei Ying is...” he starts. And he thinks for a long, long moment about the stranger in Wei Ying’s body living in his home now.

Wei Ying had always been so full of laughter, of mischief, when they were kids. He’d been chaotic and wild and kind and loyal to a fault.

Which is, of course, what got him into this whole mess anyway.

But the Wei Ying living in Jin Zixuan’s guest room now is not full of laughter. There are no easy smiles. There are no pranks and idle teasing. Wei Ying winces if someone moves too

quickly in his vicinity. Only A-Li can touch him and only if she clearly broadcasts her movements in Wei Ying's sight. Sudden noises has him tensing, crouching in a defensive position that makes him look like a prey animal on the verge of running at the scent of a predator.

He is desperately thin. His skin is sallow, waxy almost. Jin Zixuan knows there are scars, knows there are tattoos that Wei Ying had had to get to keep himself safe. He knows there is a lot more than just those outside markers on his brother-in-law's body.

He sighs.

"Wei Ying is adjusting," he says, quietly.

Lan Zhan hums on the other end, voice thoughtful. He had never met Wei Ying, had only heard stories of the Jiang's miscreant adopted son from Jiang Yanli and their social circle.

The stories are...conflicting.

"I look forward to meeting him," Lan Zhan says. *"Jiang Yanli says he's been spending much of his time in the garden. Does he need assistance? Tools? Fertilizer?"*

Jin Zixuan snorts and shakes his head. "I have no idea, man," he says, finally leaning forward to set his key in the ignition and start his car. "I've been so busy with this proposal of Meng Yao's I haven't had time to even kiss my wife at night. I'm sure A-Ling is six feet tall by now and about to pass his driver's test."

A soft chuckle and then, *"God help us when your son starts driving."*

"Hey!" Jin Zixuan says, laughing as he backs out of his marked parking spot and begins to head out of the fenced lot of Jinlintai Holdings. "A-Ling is going to be a great driver, just like his mom."

"Hm," Lan Zhan hums, laughter clear in his voice. *"I will let you go Zixuan-xiong,"* he says. *"I need to check on A-Yuan and make his lunch for tomorrow. Good night. Drive safe."*

"Yeah," Jin Zixuan sighs, blinking exhaustion from his eyes now that he's on the road and heading home. "Catch you later Zhan-ge. If you see a skeleton skulking in our flowerbeds, it's just A-Ying, okay? Don't let him scare A-Yuan."

A soft breath that might be a laugh and then Lan Zhan says, "I am sure A-Yuan will not be easily scared by your brother-in-law. He tends to get along well with the sad and lonely."

The line goes dead a moment later and Jin Zixuan stares out the windshield at the blurring headlights streaming around him, his friend's words echoing in his tired, aching skull.

He tends to get along well with the sad and lonely.

And that's just. Wow. Fucking weird, isn't it?

Because Wei Ying had never seemed sad and lonely when they were kids, right?

But then...

Then he'd killed Wen Chao and their entire fucking lives had changed.

Sad and lonely?

Wei Ying?!

Fuck.

**

Wei Ying is used to being left alone.

After the first time he'd shanked a neo-Nazi skinhead in the courtyard of the prison with the sharp end of a #2 pencil, he'd more or less been left to his own devices. There'd been fights, there always were. But most of the time it was him coming to the defense of the younger, more scared kids that got tossed in with the fucking creeps Wei Ying had lived with for too long.

One kid, Wen Ning, had cried his first week in his cell, his voice echoing through the entire block and the other inmates had jeered and catcalled him until the warden had arrived and threatened them with isolation.

The next day Wei Ying had found A-Ning backed into a shower cell, on his knees before a dude three times his size, nose bleeding and tears running down his face. He'd been choking on the dude's cock, sobbing and trying so desperately to get away.

Wei Ying had dislocated that bastard's shoulder and shattered his kneecap with part of the piping leading from the shower wall. He'd walked out with a concussion and broken arm and Wen Ning trembling but basically okay.

He'd been put in isolation for a month for that.

Wen Ning had been shifted to a less cutthroat part of the prison.

They'd been put on the same garden rotation a few months later, after Wei Ying had been released from isolation and his broken arm had healed more-or-less.

He never did find out why they'd both escaped that particular situation relatively unscathed.

So.

Wei Ying is used to being left alone.

Basically.

Now, though...

"Ying-gege, you can't put that flower there, it won't get enough sunlight!"

Wei Ying blinks, yanking himself back to reality at the sound of A-Yuan's voice and glances over the edge of his sunglasses at the little boy standing beside him. A-Yuan has his arms crossed over his Buzz Lightyear shirt, his face shadowed by the brim of his floppy Hello Kitty sunhat and he is frowning.

"A-Yuan," he says, clearing his throat and leaning back on his heels. "When did you get here?"

The little boy shrugs. "Dunno," he says. "While ago. You were thinking really hard so I didn't want to inrupt. A-die says inrupting is rude."

Wei Ying can't fight the smile that curls his lips. "Interrupting is pretty rude, I guess, yeah, baobei," he says. Then he cocks his head. "So why shouldn't I plant this flower here, hm?"

The marigolds are pungent in the morning sunshine, their bright orange heads unfurled to the light, root systems eager to settle into the rich black soil Wei Ying has painstakingly turned and mulched and fertilized for the past few weeks.

Jin Zixuan has gotten him every tool and seed he's asked for. Wei Ying suspects his sister has quietly involved herself in the background. But he doesn't mind. The garden is...

Not as barren now.

"Is A-Ling going to help?" A-Yuan says, clearly ignoring Wei Ying's question and kneeling at the bed's side and digging a finger into the loose dirt. "He never helps in the garden, does he?"

Wei Ying thinks about his nephew, absently handing A-Yuan a tiny set of Cars gardening gloves and a metal trowel. He'd found them in the garage, tags still on them and claimed them for their cause.

A-Ling wouldn't notice or care.

He and his nephew have a tenuous relationship. The little boy watches him with wary, uncertain eyes. And Wei Ying just makes sure all of his ink and scars are hidden when his nephew is in the room.

This kid though.

"I don't think so, Yuan'er," he says, shifting the marigold out of its plastic container and handing it to the little boy at his side. "Set it in just like that, good job baobei."

A-Yuan skillfully piles dirt around the little flower, patting his gloved hands gently along its base and he smiles proudly.

"I like being in the garden," he sighs, letting Wei Ying help him tilt the watering can just enough to soak the black soil surrounding the flower they'd just planted. "It's p-peac-nice."

He settles on his heels with a quiet huff and folds his arms over his knees, a smug, proud expression on his shadowed little face and Wei Ying watches him for a moment, something

aching and sweet in his chest.

“Yeah,” he says, reaching out to ruffle the little boy’s hair a moment later. “Yeah it is, isn’t it little radish.”

**

The first time Lan Zhan catches sight of Wei Ying, it’s about a month since the man had been released from prison.

Lan Zhan is standing on his back porch, nursing his habitual morning cup of tea, and enjoying the relative peace and quiet of barely 6 a.m. The neighborhood is quiet, this early in the morning. No children riding their bikes in the cul de sac. No Mrs. White with her Beatles and Janis Joplin blaring from the poolside. No Mr. Harris and the revving engines of whatever classic car or motorcycle he’d decided to work on that day.

Just.

Quiet.

“Motherfucker!”

The sound of someone shouting is nearly lost in the telltale clatter of metal tools tumbling to scatter across a stone patio. And Lan Zhan jumps, pivoting to catch sight of a stubby ponytail caught up in a red scrunchie and bared biceps.

“Good job Wei Ying,” the man with the tiny ponytail mutters and through the blue light of dawn, Lan Zhan can make out too-thin cheeks and the snaking line of a tattoo twining along the base of a slender throat.

“May I assist?” Lan Zhan asks, stepping off his porch and heading towards the still quietly cursing person just hidden behind the Jin’s hedgerow. A faint squawk meets his words and the man spins, brandishing a shovel quite skillfully.

Grey eyes, wide and glinting dangerously in the half-light, meet Lan Zhan’s over the shovel and Lan Zhan is suddenly struck with two thoughts.

His neighbor is gorgeous

He also looks like he would willingly kill Lan Zhan if he got any closer

Lan Zhan feels something twist in his stomach at that last thought. Something just this side of protective. Just this side of interested.

And he arches a brow.

“Hello,” he says, bowing his head against the shovel blade pressed tightly to his Adam’s apple. “I’m Lan Zhan. You are Wei Ying?”

The man staring at him with feral eyes gapes, eyes going impossibly wider and he sputters for a moment, the shovel not shifting even a little bit.

“Y-yeah,” he croaks. “I’m-I’m Wei Ying.”

Lan Zhan almost smiles.

“Welcome to the neighborhood,” he says.

**

The garden starts to come back, just a little bit.

Wei Ying stretches his tired back muscles out, twisting a few times and wincing when the telltale sound of his spine cracking fills the quiet evening. He can hear A-Yuan and A-Ling giggling and splashing in the kiddie pool next door, with the granddaughter of the old man who lives there with his collection of antique cars.

He can hear his sister’s quiet music filtering from the open kitchen windows, the scent of garlic and ginger rich on the cooling air.

Wei Ying smiles and folds his hands behind his head, content to just be for a while.

It’s been two months since his release. Two months of keeping his head down, avoiding Yufuren’s sharp voice when she calls every Sunday evening to talk to Jiang Yanli. Two months of nightmares and good food and trying to not punch anything that moves too quickly in the corner of his eye.

Two months of remembering how to be a person again.

“The garden is coming along well.”

The soft, deep voice of his neighbor washes over the stillness of the night and Wei Ying cannot fight the way his skin goosebumps in response to Lan Zhan’s sudden appearance. He shifts, just enough to keep the other man in full sight and smiles.

“Hey Lan Zhan,” he says, lowering his arms and crossing them over his bare, scarred chest. “Looking for your little guy? He’s playing with A-Ling and the Harris granddaughter next door.” He jerks his head in the general direction of childrens’ shrieking and shifts back on his left heel. Lan Zhan hums, deep in his chest and watches him for a long, quiet moment.

“I simply came to check and see how you were doing, Wei Ying,” he says finally. “And to see how the garden is doing. A-Yuan has told me much of it.”

Wei Ying is quiet, watching Lan Zhan from the corner of his eye as he pretends to survey his work.

Lan Zhan is tall, slender but solidly built. Wei Ying has caught sight of the man doing yoga in the mornings, out on the screened in porch. He has seen the man’s toned muscles rippling beneath tight spandex shorts and a barely there crop top.

Lan Zhan is slender and elegant.

But Wei Ying has a sneaking suspicion he could break Wei Ying in half.

His hair is slightly disheveled tonight, the careful style he normally keeps it in while teaching at the university, a bit rumpled. As if he'd run his fingers through it a few times. Or someone else had.

Wei Ying shifts on the balls of his feet and tries to not think about his next door neighbor's sex life.

"You're-you're all right with A-Yuan hanging out with me, right?" he suddenly blurts, before he can stop himself and he winces, closing his eyes and mentally facepalming himself.

Smooth.

Amber brown eyes turn to meet his and a slender brow arches.

"A-Yuan seems to like you rather a lot, considering how often he speaks of you," Lan Zhan says, bending to inspect some of the zucchini plants Wei Ying had just planted the day before. His fingers are tapered at the tips, Wei Ying notices, the nails perfectly filed and trimmed.

Wei Ying clenches his own bitten and cracked painted nails and shifts to squat beside the other man.

"He does, huh?" he asks, a very big part of him growing warm at the realization. He smiles at the marigolds he'd planted a few weeks before with the kid. "He's a good kid. So smart. It's almost scary, Lan Zhan."

Lan Zhan's lips quirk, the smallest of smiles that Wei Ying suspects are normally reserved for Lan Zhan's son and that warm feeling spreads a bit further.

"You took care of the garden for my shijie," he says, leaning forward to pluck an errant weed from beneath a baby chili plant's delicate green leaves. "But you stopped."

"Mn," Lan Zhan says, fully sitting upon the ground now, his legs criss-crossed and hands folded neatly in his lap. He's so upright, so stern looking.

But Wei Ying has seen him do yoga in a tiny crop top and a pair of tiny shorts with the word "ephemeral" written in curly font on the ass.

He has seen Lan Zhan with dirt on his hands and melted popsicle in his hair and finger paint on his Italian leather shoes.

Lan Zhan is watching him-watching Wei Ying watching him. And Wei Ying blushes.

"I began teaching full time at the university around the same time I found A-Yuan and decided to adopt him," Lan Zhan says. "My time suddenly became very sacred. And I am afraid the garden fell to the wayside." He is still studying Wei Ying, gaze solemn and just a bit heated along the edges. He shifts forward slowly, hand rising carefully and Wei Ying stiffens, eyes flicking from Lan Zhan's pretty lips to that hand.

The moment the other man's fingers brush his cheek, to flick the dirt that'd caught in the hollow of his eye there, the warm feeling fades and ice water invades Wei Ying's bloodstream.

He jerks back from the other man and rises so quickly he stumbles. His heart hammers in his chest and everything in his brain screams at him to run to run to run to fight to get away to hide to run

To fucking *run Wei Ying*.

"G-goodnight Lan Zhan," he stammers, his voice choked on the bitter copper taste of panic and fear. His vision tunnels as he spins on his heel and rushes from the garden up into his sister's house.

He thinks he hears Lan Zhan call his name as he slams the door closed behind him and snaps the outside lights off with a gasp.

Wei Ying?!

**

Lan Yuan's best friend is his (distant) cousin Jingyi. His second best friend is Zizhen. His third best friend is A-Qing. And then there's Jin Ling.

But his very, very, very, very, very, favorite best friend in the whole world is Ying-gege. He loves sitting with Ying-gege in the garden. They don't even have to talk that much. Ying-gege will sometimes talk about his plants, or Scooby-Doo or his friend Wen Ning. Sometimes they sing silly songs like The Wheels on the Bus. Sometimes. Sometimes Ying-gege just lets A-Yuan dig in the dirt and play with his trucks. As long as he stays away from the seedlings, of course.

Those days Ying-gege calls his Sad Days. He just sits in his chair, with his big glasses and hat on and stares at ayi's hat. He says his hands hurt a lot. And his knees. Some days he limps, usually if it's about to storm. Some days, if A-Yuan moves too fast or speaks too loud, Ying-gege will flinch or make a strange noise. Some days, if Ying-gege isn't in the garden, ayi will come out to tell him that Ying-gege is having a Bad Day and that he just needs rest.

A-Yuan wishes Ying-gege didn't have so many Sad and Bad Days. A-Yuan wishes he could do what he does with a-die and climb into Ying-gege's lap with Bunny and hold him.

But Ying-gege doesn't like being held.

So A-Yuan can't do that.

Monday is Talk About Your Best Friend day in class.

A-Yuan has to stand up in front of class and talk about his best friend and why he chose that person and what his favorite things about that person is.

A-Yuan wishes he was like Zizhen and A-Qing and could stand up at the front of class with his best friend and talk about them. But Ying-gege isn't allowed to leave his house or back yard. So A-Yuan can't do that.

"My best friend is Ying-gege," he says, nervously, Monday afternoon after second recess and snack time. He rocks on his feet, head ducked down, avoiding the gaze of his teacher and classmates. His fingers clench around the drawing he holds tight to his chest. He is wearing the Cars gloves Ying-gege had given him when they planted the marigolds.

"You can speak a little louder, Yuan," his teacher says, her voice patient and gentle. It reminds him of ayi's voice, when she's talking to Jin Ling about eating his vegetables.

A-Yuan blushes a bit and bites his lip. He wishes Jingyi could stand up beside him. He wishes Ying-gege was here, laughing and teasing him and smearing dirt on his nose and calling him a little radish.

He straightens and clears his throat.

"I have a lot of best friends," he says finally, his voice clear, if a little trembly. "My a-die is my favorite person. And Jingyi is my best friend for sure. And then there's Zizhen and Jin Ling and A-Qing." He bites his lip again, glancing at his teacher, who watches him with her brows gently raised and her chin cupped in her hand. She smiles and nods ever so slightly. And A-Yuan takes a deep breath and flips his drawing out so that the class can see the figures drawn there.

"But my best friend is Ying-gege," he says, pointing at a crudely drawn figure in black, sunglasses and a big hat taking up most of his head. "He lives next door to us. He can't leave his house but I don't think he minds. He spends a lot of time outside, in the garden my a-die shares with my bofu and ayi."

He doesn't see his teacher's brows lower a bit at "he can't leave his house."

He powers through.

"Ying-gege has a lot of tattoos and scars. He says they're battle scars. I don't know what he battled. But sometimes he gets really sad or scared," A-Yuan says, shrugging. "He also won't let me wear his ankle bracelet. He says that it's meant to keep him anchored. I don't know what that means."

His teacher is openly staring at him now, her mouth dropped open.

"Jin Ling told me he did something really bad and hurt a lot of people," A-Yuan says, shrugging again. "But I think he's really nice and he likes planting things and he has a nice smile and laugh. I think he's pretty cool!"

"Oh-okay Lan Yuan," his teacher says, rising suddenly and placing her hands gently on his shoulders. "That is-that is a very interesting best friend you have! He sounds very...unique. May I-may I have your drawing so that I can hang it up on the bulletin board later?"

Lan Yuan's fingers tighten around the bright red construction paper and he hesitates, some small part of him worried that he might have done or said something wrong. And then he nods, handing the drawing over.

"He really is my best friend, though," he says, bottom lip wobbling just a bit as tears threaten to spill from his eyes. "He-he lets me plant things in his garden."

His teacher just pats him on the head and smiles a tight, worried little smile and leads him to his chair.

Then she announces that Best Friend Show and Tell will have to take place a little later and that she needs to speak with someone and that they must be good for Teacher Assistant Stacy.

And A-Yuan realizes that maybe...

Maybe he shouldn't have drawn Ying-gege for class.

**

Wei Ying is lying down in the garden, having a "Moment of Introspection" (i.e. emotional crisis) when he hears his sister talking to Lan Zhan.

"Jin Ling says Yuan'er got in trouble for talking about A-Ying today in class," she's saying, her voice pitched low but Wei Ying can hear the concern through the whisper of the corn stalks he lies near. His heart clenches and he digs his hands in the dirt, willing himself to stop to stop listening this isn't his business fuck why did A-Yuan bring him up in class what respectable teacher would want to hear a five year old talk about a convict fuck fuck fuck-

"He did not get in trouble," Lan Zhan says, voice gentle and maybe there's a hint of laughter in his cool, cultured tone? Wei Ying digs his fingers deeper into the soil he's spent so many days trying to bring back to life. "His teacher was simply concerned that A-Yuan seemed close to an adult figure she was not aware of and wanted to make sure I was aware of his safety with said adult." Lan Zhan is quiet for a moment and there's a faint rustle of clothes. "I see nothing wrong with A-Yuan's continuing interactions with your brother. I believe their friendship, as unconventional as it may appear to those outside of our families, is beneficial for both of them."

Jiang Yanli sniffs and Wei Ying winces, squeezing his eyes closed tight. He hates making his sister cry.

He hates being the reason behind her stress and worry and hurt and sadness.

Hates it.

"I think he's doing so much better, A-Zhan," she says, quietly. "He smiles more, these days. I heard him humming that song you play on the piano for A-Yuan when he's having a bad night. I just. I don't want him to hurt anymore."

"Mn," Lan Zhan hums and Wei Ying opens his eyes, just enough to peek through the zucchini bushes, and he sees Lan Zhan pat his sister gently on the shoulder. His heart stutters,

some small, very scared part of him wishing Lan Zhan would touch him so casually. So gently.

Like Wei Ying would even allow that to happen...

“He needs time and care, which he is getting here, with you and Zixuan-xiong,” Lan Zhan says, squeezing her shoulder. “Be patient. He will continue to adjust. He may never be the same Wei Ying you had as children, but he will find a way to be the Wei Ying he needs to be, now.”

Jiang Yanli sniffles some more and summons a small, watery smile. She wipes her tears away, squaring her shoulders and she nods.

“Yes, you’re right, of course A-Zhan,” she says, patting his arm. “Thank you. I-Thank you for letting A-Yuan spend time with him. I don’t-I think he would be very hurt if we had to stop them from spending time in the garden together.”

“Mn,” Lan Zhan says. “I should go finish up dinner for A-Yuan. You will be all right?”

Jiang Yanli nods and Wei Ying sags back into the dirt, tuning their goodbyes out, his eyes closed against the prick of tears burning at the corner of his eyes.

He wishes...god he wishes the dirt could swallow him up. That he could sink into the rich, compost scented soil and become food for the worms. For the plants. Truly, that’s the only thing he’s useful for, isn’t it?

Fertilizer.

Rotting, decaying bones, crumbling to dust as roots and bugs take him apart and break him down, suck him dry.

A-Yuan got in trouble because of him.

Shijie is hurting because of him.

Jiang Cheng won’t even come over to see her or A-Ling.

Yu-furen threatens to have him forcibly removed from the house every Sunday.

Lan Zhan thinks he is good for A-Yuan.

The garden smells like fresh turned dirt and green things and fresh flowers and herbs caught in dew.

He should bury himself in the soil and just fall asleep forever here.

Truly.

Who would miss him?

“Wei Ying.”

**

Lan Zhan had seen Wei Ying lie down in the garden while he was chopping vegetables for dinner. He’d looked up from the cutting board, at a sudden movement from the Jin’s backyard. He’d seen Wei Ying kneel in the soil, between the corn and zucchini bushes, shoulders trembling slightly.

He’d seen Wei Ying sag to his side, to vanish in the greenery.

Lan Zhan had rushed from the kitchen, before he could stop himself to ask why and headed for the garden.

Which is when Jiang Yanli had called for him.

Every instinct in his body told him to leave her side, to go to the garden, to push the corn fronds and wide zucchini leaves aside, to reach deep into the dirt and grab cooling flesh and pull.

Pull Wei Ying from the dirt.

The thought of Wei Ying, fading into the dirt of his garden, beneath the plants, to fade away from all thought and memory...

It leaves a bitter, copper taste on the back of Lan Zhan’s tongue.

He brushes the leaves aside and sees Wei Ying curled on his side, hands tangled in his hair, body desperately still, lost to the shadows of dusk and the garden.

And he sets his hand gently on the other man’s hip.

And tries to pull him free of the clinging garden dirt.

“Wei Ying.”

**

The peppers are the first to bear fruit.

Wei Ying is kneeling beside the raised bed, his eyes wide behind the lenses of his big sunglasses, his mouth dropped ever so slightly open at the sight of slender red chilis spread out before him.

A-Yuan is leaning over his shoulder, baby smooth cheek pressed up against Wei Ying’s and he gasps.

“A pepper!” he crows, pointing excitedly at the plants Wei Ying has carefully, doubtfully, cared for, the past few weeks.

Wei Ying doesn't realize there are tears on his cheeks until Lan Yuan presses a dirty finger to a tear trail and follows it down to his chin.

"Don't cry, Ying-gege," he says, wrapping his arms tight around Wei Ying's neck and pressing his head into his tiny chest. "It's okay. Don't cry, okay?"

Wei Ying's arms tremble ever so slightly when they rise to wrap around A-Yuan's tiny body.

"Okay baobei," he whispers, vision wavering with tears as he gazes at the peppers. "Okay, I won't."

**

The garden flourishes.

It blooms and outgrows its boundaries. The Lan's and the Jin's are overwhelmed by zucchini and tomatoes. Their neighbors put signs up on their front doors that zucchini dumping is not accepted. Zucchini still manage to appear in their homes though.

None of them have the heart to really put a stop to it though, not when they see Wei Ying and A-Yuan in the garden, laughing and teasing each other.

The garden flourishes.

And Wei Ying's smiles come a little easier.

"Hey, Lan Zhan," he calls from the Jin's porch one night, sometime in late August. His hair is longer now, nearly shoulder length. Bits and pieces of it always hang and float about his face, not entirely long enough to fit in the red scrunchie he wears most days. His sunglasses are shoved up over his forehead. His arms are bare.

Lan Zhan feels a small smile curl his lips as he slips between the hedges and approaches the man grinning down at him.

"Wei Ying," he says stopping at the bottom step of the porch and gazing up into Wei Ying's eyes.

Wei Ying's cheeks are fuller now, his skin sunkissed and glowing with good food and fresh air. He is more filled out, his body no longer desperately skinny. The ridges of his spine no longer poke through his shirt when he stoops to pull weeds. Lan Zhan can barely see the outline of his ribs when he goes about shirtless in the mornings.

Wei Ying is flourishing too.

Lan Zhan gazes up at him and tries to not think about how it would feel to hold this healthier, sunkissed and smiling Wei Ying close.

"I have something for you," Wei Ying says, laughter in his voice, clearly teasing. He has his hand behind his back, hiding something from sight.

Lan Zhan arches a brow.

“Mn,” he says, nostrils flaring when the musky, dirt and sweat scent of Wei Ying washes across his nose. His mouth goes dry at the thought of kissing that scent away from Wei Ying’s skin. Of having that scent on his hands, long after Wei Ying has left his side.

He...

“Here!” Wei Ying crows, suddenly thrusting his hand out and Lan Zhan looks down, forcing his brain to focus, to see a truly remarkable specimen of a zucchini.

And he sighs.

“I am running out of zucchini recipes,” he says mournfully, accepting the squash and ignoring the way his skin sparks when their fingers brush. “Thank you, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying is laughing, grin so wide his eyes crinkle.

“You’re welcome,” he says, leaning down suddenly to press a light kiss to Lan Zhan’s cheek. “Night, Zhanzhan.”

Lan Zhan is frozen, hand tight around the zucchini’s still sun-warm width, and he stares after Wei Ying’s bouncing ponytail until the other man is long lost to sight.

And he tries to remember what it feels like to breathe without the fresh garden scent of Wei Ying in his lungs.

**

The garden goes dormant in late November.

The last of the potatoes are pulled, the turnips are roasted and pickled. The garlic is planted deep, to germinate slowly throughout the cooler months. The soil is turned and mixed with leaves and compost.

A-Yuan tells it goodnight and to sleep well.

Wei Ying tries to not panic about not having dirt constantly under his nails.

Lan Zhan and Jin Zixuan discuss building a joint greenhouse between their homes.

Chuck Gransley arrives with his key and offers Wei Ying freedom.

Wei Ying tries to not panic about what that may mean.

“Congratulations on being cleared of all charges, Steven,” Chuck says as he deactivates the bracelet. “Can’t believe it took them 13 years to find out you were framed. Amazing how much forensics have changed, right?”

“Yeah, Chuck,” Wei Ying says, his hands ice-cold and his heart hammering forcefully against his ribs. He tries to not look at the sight of the bracelet being removed. Tries to not feel naked when the steady weight of the device is removed.

Tries...to breathe.

“Good to see that gone, eh,” Chuck says, chuckling and patting Wei Ying heavily on the shoulder. “Good on you kid. All right. Well, I guess that’s me gone then. Reach out if you need anything, okay Steven?”

And just like that.

Just

Like

That.

Wei Ying is alone.

Truly alone.

He runs.

**

It’s snowing the night Wei Ying knocks on the front door.

Lan Zhan is deep in the middle of finals grading, his feet tucked in a fuzzy blanket, a soft sweater just this side of too old, draped around his wide shoulders. Yet another cup of tea has gone abandoned and cold at his elbow.

He blinks up into the warm glow of his office when the echoing sound of knocking breaks him free of yet another essay on music theory and he frowns.

“Wei Ying?”

Wei Ying is...

Is on his porch.

Wei Ying is wrapped up in a coat, his hair hanging loose and wild about his face. It’s almost impossible to see his eyes. There is snow in his hair, in the furred collar of the coat he wears. (It’s Jiang Yanli’s—he’d grabbed it without really paying attention as he ran from the house, Lan Zhan finds out later)

Wei Ying is.

Shaking.

“Come inside,” Lan Zhan says, stepping aside and trying to resist pulling the other man into his arms, to pull him tight against his chest. To cradle his head close to his throat and press a kiss to his temple.

To.

“I’m sorry Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying is chattering, pale, skinny fingers dug tight into the front of the coat. “I-I had to get-I had to go-the garden-I...I’m sorry.”

He is hesitating, snow dripping from his hair, from the coat collar. Snow puddles at his feet. Which are bare, Lan Zhan realizes with a jolt. He does not notice the empty ankle. Does not see the ring of paler skin there.

Not until later.

“Come,” he says, reaching slowly forward and catching Wei Ying’s icy fingers in his own. “No apologies, Wei Ying. Come get warm. I am here.”

And he so very gently, so very carefully pulls Wei Ying through his doorway and into the warmth of his home.

**

Wei Ying’s scars are varied.

There are as many on his conscious as there are on his body. Lan Zhan promises himself he will get to know each one. That he will soothe them with words and kisses. That he will help this beautiful, impossibly smart, ridiculously kind man blossom.

Like Wei Ying had forced the barren garden between their homes to blossom the summer before.

Lan Zhan promises himself that one day.

One day, Wei Ying will bloom beneath his and A-Yuan’s careful care. And out of the barren dirt of his past, Wei Ying will become the man he always was, beneath the hurt.

He awaits that day, much like his son and Wei Ying wait for the day when they can once more dig and play within the rich soil of their garden.

They wait.

Together.

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